

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 12: Incidents

- ❖ 15 January 1988.
- ❖ Current inventory of the Strikeforce space station contents:
- ❖ One deactivated Warscout robot.
- ❖ One deactivated nuclear warhead.
- ❖ Several purloined satellite components.
- ❖ One rescued genius scientist.
- ❖ Insufficient cheese dip.

‘Computer, integrate this new power curve in the fifth dimension. And knight to king six, check.’

‘Confirmed. Bishop takes knight.’

Carla Zod studied the complex graph the Computer displayed on a screen. ‘Yes, I think that will do it, don’t you?’

‘Information: I am a model GM-1 Intelligence Matrix with 10^{18} parallel neural nodes and a data storage of 107 petabytes. I am not a theoretical physicist.’

‘That was rhetorical, Computer. But, yes, I think it will do it. And, knight takes bishop. Check mate.’

- ❖ I hate it when that happens.

‘I need to look up some research papers. Can you set the teleport beam to the university library in San Francisco?’

‘Confirmed.’

Fifteen minutes later, Carla was settling down to a Friday evening’s reading in the library. When a couple of old colleagues came over to say hello and ask her what she was doing with herself, she was evasive. How could she explain that she was living on an orbiting space station and working on the problem of sending it back in time to the 24th century?

*

Nightflyer ran through the desert evening, a thin crescent Moon barely illuminating his path along Highway 15. This Friday-evening run from Los Angeles to Las Vegas had become a regular part of his fitness routine, but tonight he maintained a steady 70 miles per hour, not pushing his limits.

Ahead, by an outcropping of rock, he saw the lights of a car, a convertible, halted by the side of the road. He slowed and debated whether to detour off the road or continue straight past. Then he saw the woman kneeling by the front wheel and struggling, in an unsuitable, tight evening dress, to lift the spare into place. Unable to pass by where help was needed, he trotted up to the woman.

‘Do you need a hand there?’ he called while he was still some distance away, anxious not to alarm her. The woman stood and peered uncertainly in his direction—his grey jumpsuit was an effective camouflage in the moonlight.

‘Thank you. I think I can manage ...’

Nightflyer's inexperience with 20th-century Earth prevented him from recognising the trace of a Russian accent in her voice. But as he got closer, some other things did strike him. First, that the woman was uncommonly beautiful, petite, with intense dark eyes and long black hair. Second, that he may have seen her somewhere before. At a table in Las Vegas last week, maybe? A strange coincidence ...

No such thing as coincidence, his intuition whispered. *Danger ...*

By now he was a few feet away from the car and his body automatically tensed for action. Then the woman smiled at him, and conscious thought left him.

'Thank you for stopping, Nightflyer. I am sure you can help me.'

Danger. Run away.

He stood and smiled idiotically at the woman.

Then her very large companion stepped into view.

*

Electron and Scorpio had just completed a short patrol of the city streets in which they had stopped a mugging and a car-jacking, and Scorpio had helped an elderly lady carry her groceries to her car ('I think we should do more to help people, not just fight criminals,' he had explained). Now they were teleporting up to the space station, where Electron had promised to help Scorpio fashion his new 'shield'.

They appeared on the teleport platform, and looked out onto the control deck where Nightflyer sat accompanied by an unknown man and woman.

'What's going on?' asked Scorpio, tensing for trouble.

'Scorpio, this is my friend Nightwing,' said Nightflyer, smiling happily.

'O...kay,' said Scorpio, mystified. He and Electron stepped off the platform.

'And this is my associate, Detonator,' said the woman Nightflyer had called Nightwing. She was now dressed in a tight-fitting black costume with a voluminous black cloak that draped over the back of the chair she was sitting in. Detonator stood silently behind her, 300 pounds of solid muscle crammed incongruously into a black formal suit.

'I'll ask one more time,' said Scorpio patiently, 'What's going on?'

'It ... seemed like I should invite them up,' beamed Nightflyer.

'I think you will find that he is helplessly in my thrall,' said Nightwing. 'And before you do anything rash,' she continued hurriedly, as Scorpio took a step forward, 'I would like to demonstrate my companion's power.' She spoke a few words in Russian, and Detonator responded in heavily accented English.

'Twelve metres beneath our feet is nuclear power plant.'

Nightwing switched to English. 'And please demonstrate what you can do to power plants with a mere thought, Detonator.'

Without warning, one of the consoles encircling the command deck exploded in a shower of sparks and plastic fragments. Electron rapidly moved to a portable fire extinguisher and directed a stream of suppression gas at the smoking console. Scorpio remained where he was, not taking his eyes off the Russians while he calculated distances and the chances of him disabling Detonator with a single blow.

'Computer, what was that?' asked Electron.

'Spontaneous explosion of backup power capacitor beneath the panel. Cause unknown.'

'Detonator's code name is apt, as you see. Trust me when I say he is fully capable of repeating that feat with your space station's power plant. With a much larger effect, naturally.'

'Nightflyer?' said Scorpio. But Nightflyer merely shrugged and smiled. Clearly the threat of imminent destruction hadn't shaken whatever hold Nightwing had over him. Scorpio glanced over at Electron, who gave a slight shake of his head. He didn't think he could reliably stop the big Russian from blowing them all to kingdom come.

'All right, you have my attention,' Scorpio said. 'You seem to be here to talk, so what do you want?'

‘Nothing that will prove onerous to you, I assure you. My government has become aware of your arrival and we suspect your origins. Indeed, we are sure you are not Americans, even though you operate exclusively there. And so we see no reason why we shouldn’t be allies, or even friends.’

‘You’ve got a funny way of making friends,’ said Electron.

‘She’s been friendly to me,’ smiled Nightflyer.

‘This is ... regrettable. But we had to gain your attention. We have a problem and we believe you may be able to help us.’

‘I’m willing to help anyone,’ said Scorpio, ‘Whatever their nationality. But when people brainwash my team and threaten to blow up my space station, it does tend to tick me off.’

‘As I said, regrettable, but this appeared the best way to ensure you would listen to us.’

‘We’re listening,’ said Electron.

‘We represent a team of patriotic defenders of the Soviet Union called the Red Guard. One of our team mates is called the Great Bear. He is a brave and loyal man, and is currently missing in the United States.’

‘What was a Russian agent doing in the United States?’ Electron wanted to know.

‘Irrelevant. Suffice to say, he was here on urgent business, and had an altercation with the American terrorist group known as the Anarchists. We believe they are holding him against his will, and we have been unable to locate him. We wish you to help us. Because, as I am sure you understand, our ability to move openly in the States is limited.’

‘Very well,’ said Scorpio, ‘We will look for him.’

‘We will?’ asked Electron in surprise.

‘We will. After you two leave the station.’

‘Oh, Scorpio, how can I trust you to keep your word? We will remain here until you bring us the Great Bear, or evidence of his whereabouts.’

‘That could take weeks!’ protested Electron. ‘We’re not detectives!’

‘Please do not make it take weeks.’

‘We have contacts, we can make enquiries tonight. Nightflyer, we’ll need you to come with us,’ said Scorpio.

‘I’d love to—’ said Nightflyer.

‘But you will stay with me.’

‘—But I will stay with Nightwing,’ he smiled.

‘Very well. Electron, it’s just us. Computer, beam us down. And you,’ he pointed at Detonator, ‘Don’t break anything else. You don’t want to make me angry.’

‘You won’t like him when he’s angry,’ came Electron’s parting shot as they teleported down.

‘Would you like some cheese dip?’ the Computer asked, to the bemusement of the Russians.

*

‘We caved in to that awfully quickly,’ said Electron when they were again down on the city streets of Los Angeles.

‘We didn’t “cave”, we manoeuvred strategically.’

‘You mean, “ran away”?’

‘Not at all. Up there we couldn’t do anything except call her bluff, which seemed risky. Down here, we have options. We can teleport up at any time of our choosing—unless she’s a 24th-century computer scientist, she can’t take control of the teleport away from us. Right, Computer?’

‘Confirmed,’ came from Scorpio’s communicator.

‘Also, we can hook up with Avatar, and his bag of tricks might give us an edge if we confront them again. But more importantly, we can investigate what’s happened to this Great Bear.’

‘Seriously? You’re going to do what she says?’

‘Not because she says it, but because I think it’s worth investigating. Possibly Great Bear is a spy or enemy agent who has defected to the West—this apparently happens in this crazy century—and we don’t want to interfere in 20th-century politics.’

‘Agreed.’

‘But if he is being held against his will by the Anarchists—or anybody—then he is a man who needs our help.’

‘Ok, you’re right, we need to check it. Got any ideas?’

‘We’ll start at DICE headquarters here in Los Angeles, and see what they know. Meanwhile, let’s try Avatar.’

But when they tried to reach Avatar, they received no answer. Worryingly, their demonic team mate was evidently unable or unwilling to answer his communicator.

*

Avatar’s communicator beeped on his wrist. But Avatar’s body lay in the cheap apartment he rented in Los Angeles, while his astral body sped through the night.

Ahead of him, the ghostly form of a teenage girl soared over highway and countryside, as unfettered by gravity as he was.

Avatar had devoted most of his free time over last few days to tracking down this girl. When she had first attacked him outside the Zods’ apartment building in San Francisco, only he had seen her and felt the power of her magic. His team mates in Strikeforce were sceptical, but Avatar had suspected that he was fighting not the girl’s physical body but the invisible, immaterial projection of her astral body, only visible to his demonic senses. A subsequent encounter at the Haley Hotel when he was in his own astral form had confirmed this for him—and also presented a mystery. Although she was ostensibly aiding the villainous Anarchists, her actions during the encounter led him to believe she meant him no harm. It was a mystery he meant to solve, and one that he had not mentioned to his team mates in Strikeforce.

Tonight, after many days and nights of searching by mystical and physical means, he had located her in Los Angeles, again working with the Anarchists to steal from and then destroy a warehouse. Avatar didn’t share humans’ attachment to physical goods, and so considered stealing a fairly minor crime, so once he had determined that no human lives were at risk he allowed the theft to go ahead and the Anarchists to go free. Remaining unperceived in his astral form, and being careful not to let the girl see him, he followed her as she left the other Anarchists and flew steadily northwards. Astral movement was limited only by the magician’s willpower, and the girl flew at phenomenal speed. But still, Avatar knew he was faster. He was content, however, to hang back and let her lead him where she would.

The lights of a city came into view and the girl descended, followed by Avatar. She drifted towards a district of narrow alleys between old, haphazardly-constructed buildings. Avatar recognised this from his television viewing. It was San Francisco’s famous Chinatown, but not the gaudy tourist streets he had seen on television, this was deep within the back alleys of the city’s ancient enclave. Her insubstantial form slipped inside a shuttered shop, and Avatar followed her inside.

The shop was tiny and cluttered with trinkets of all descriptions: antiques, curios, and the kind of ‘authentic’ Chinese artefacts that pandered to gullible Western tourists. Although the door had shown a closed sign, a man was sitting on a stool behind the cluttered counter as if waiting for customers. The man was Chinese and his wrinkled skin, straggly white hair and beard, and stooped posture suggested great age. But his eyes were clear and piercing. The girl, still in astral form, faced the man.

Avatar’s astral body moved with complete silence, and he took care to remain behind the girl. Whatever she was about to do to this unsuspecting mortal, Avatar would be ready.

Surprisingly, she spoke. It was in Chinese, a language he didn’t understand. The man looked up at her and answered in the same language. Then he looked directly behind her, at Avatar, and added in English, ‘And who is your new friend?’

The girl spun round and saw Avatar. Her hands rose, fingers spread in a spell-casting gesture, and her lips began to form words.

‘Wait!’ cried Avatar, ‘I only want to talk!’

The girl stopped her spell but didn’t take her eyes off him.

‘And who are you, demon?’ the old man asked.

‘Avatar.’

‘Not your true name, hmm? Oh, never mind, I do not expect to hear a demon’s true name. I am Wang and this is Astra, though they may not be our true names either. Who are you bound to, Avatar?’

‘I am bound to no man.’

‘Eh, here is a pretty state of affairs. A demon in the mortal world but not bound by a sorcerer ... but I perceive that amulet you wear has been fashioned as a binding object. Oh yes, I can recognise the amulet of Karoona when I see it.’

Avatar gave a start. It was impossible that this old man knew the name Karoona, let alone recognise his amulet for what it was. That put him a short step from knowing Avatar’s true name, a fact which made the demon extremely uncomfortable.

‘Are you a sorcerer?’

‘Me? No, I am a simple old shop keeper, though maybe I know a few things, eh? But Astra here, beware of her, she is a powerful mistress of magic.’

An astral body doesn’t have colour in the sense that a human can perceive, but still Avatar thought the silent young girl—surely no more than 16 human years—was blushing bright red. He addressed her directly.

‘You’re a villain. You work with the Anarchists. But that second time we met, I thought you were helping me.’

‘I ... was trying,’ she said finding her voice. She spoke in low, hesitating tones. ‘I don’t want to work with them. I hate what they do. But they ...’

‘They compel her,’ Wang finished for her. ‘But it is a sad story and not for your ears, demon.’

‘Maybe it is. Maybe I can help.’

‘Demons helping humans? No, that is not the way of the multiverse. You are indeed something new, eh? I would know your story, demon.’

Avatar considered the pair. He knew first-hand that the girl could use powerful spells, but her astral body would feel physical to his, and he was confident that his demonic strength and speed was enough to beat a human girl. The old man was an unknown quantity, but ...

Avatar took a chance and, to gain their trust, he told them his story.

*

In the 24th century, a fumbling human sorcerer—his name is neither known nor important—had stumbled across the pentagram amulet that Avatar now wore, and the words of a ritual that would bind a demon to it. Demons exist as immaterial concepts in their own dimension, literally beings of pure thought and energy. But a portion of their essences could be given physical form in our universe, and could be bound to a suitable object, forcing them to use their considerable powers in the service of the human who held the object.

The sorcerer had prepared carefully, drawn the correct circles and symbols on the floor to trap the demon, and spoken the words of summoning. The demon Karouvicine had been drawn to this world.

Karouvicine may not have had the horns or the fire and brimstone of popular legend, but he was undoubtedly inhuman. Standing like a carved basalt statue, a man’s body with a jackal’s head, rows of wicked teeth, and baleful red eyes, he glared with undisguised fury at his summoner. Trapped within the mystical circle, he growled his impotent displeasure.

Stuttering with sudden, cold fear, the sorcerer gasped out, 'I—I bind you to this—' His speech faltered and he stumbled, clutching his chest. 'To this—this—amulet,' he completed the formula. He tried to brandish the amulet and dominate Karouvicine's will. It was no good. Literally frightened to death, he collapsed as he experienced a massive heart attack.

Karouvicine looked down at the prone human in puzzlement. This was something new. Experimentally, he stretched a foot outside the summoning circle. It didn't hold him! He was free! But then his gaze was drawn to the amulet. He plucked it from the dead man's hands. He felt its hold over him. But there was no mortal to take it and order him.

He thought for a long moment. He was trapped on this plane until released from the object ... and yet, not bound to a master.

Slowly, he lowered the chain of the amulet around his own neck. This was unprecedented, but ... 'I am my own master,' he said out loud, in wonder. 'Now ... what to do?'

*

Avatar quickly glossed over the rest of his story, how he had found he enjoyed human company and had joined the Special Police so he could help the society he was now a permanent part of, eventually volunteering for the one-way trip through time to save the future world from destruction. Astra looked sceptical at the idea of a demon helping people, but Wang was nodding as if he understood.

'And now you,' said Avatar to the girl.

Astra's own story came pouring out. How her parents had died when she was four and she was raised in a state orphanage. How she didn't learn she had other family until news of her grandmother's death reached her a few months ago. How she had received a chest of her grandmother's books on her sixteenth birthday and slowly, haltingly, taught herself the spells described within them. And the fateful day when the sorcerer Hellfire had discovered her, and tricked her into releasing her astral form. He had seized her physical body and cast protective spells around it, preventing her from returning to it, then held it hostage to ensure she would cooperate with him.

'I have to do what he says, because he can order my body destroyed at any time. And if my body dies ...'

Avatar understood. If the body died, she died. It was why he went to extreme lengths to protect his own comatose body when he released his astral form.

'I will help you return to your body,' he said.

'But I don't know where it is!' she wailed, tears welling up in her eyes. 'He has it hidden and mystically shielded. Wang has been coaching me in more powerful location spells, but ... but I'm not good enough!'

'Not good enough ... yet!' said Avatar reassuringly. 'But you will be. And I will help you. I promise.'

*

The Department of Intelligence and Counter Espionage headquarters in Los Angeles was housed in the basement level of an ordinary office building. Scorpio had been issued with an electronic pass, which he used to open a secure door located in the car park, and he and Electron entered the base. The agent on guard duty recognised them, of course, and waved them in. Electron was surprised to hear Scorpio acknowledge the agent by name.

'Do you come here often?' asked Electron.

'I'm officially deputised by the agency,' Scorpio explain. 'So I liaise with Eastwood on occasion, and I've been sparring with a few of his agents in their gym.'

'Huh.'

Scorpio led Electron to Major Eastwood's office, where he knocked on the door and entered without waiting for a response. Eastwood was behind his desk, in conversation with his right-hand man, Don Newman.

'Come in Scorpio, it's not like we're likely to be doing anything secretive,' groused Eastwood.

'Sorry, Major, but we're pushed for time. I'll come right to it. What do you know about someone called Nightwing?'

Don let out a whistle. 'You're not planning on tangling with her I hope?'

'We're past the planning stage,' said Electron drily.

'She's a Soviet agent,' said Eastwood.

'She'll say a Soviet super hero,' Don interjected.

'I don't care what she says. She's a spy and an assassin. She's not on American soil, is she?'

'Not ... at the moment,' said Scorpio, cautiously. 'But she's asked us to help her track down a team-mate of hers, the Great Bear.'

'No. Flat-out no. She's an enemy agent, and as long as you want to maintain any kind of security clearance in this organisation, you don't work with enemies of the West. This is a two-way street, you know, you can't just use DICE for your ends and ignore our own priorities.'

'I understand, Major. But she says the Anarchists have him. Surely that makes finding him a priority for you, as well as her? What if they're trying to turn him, use him as an asset against us?'

'Our intelligence is that the Anarchists do have the Great Bear. And if we knew where he was, we'd be getting him away from them. But we don't. We don't even know if he's in America. Chances are he's been held in the same place as Professor Zod, and any number of other people they've been snatching. Somewhere, they've got a big, secure facility, but we have no leads to it.'

'And trust me, we've tried,' Don put in. 'It's priority number one for us at the moment.'

'For us too,' said Scorpio. 'We've promised Zod's daughter we will find him, and now we have another reason—'

'Just how are you entangled with Nightwing?' demanded Eastwood.

'It's complicated, Major. What can you tell me about her power to mentally control others?'

'Not a lot, other than the fact that we have verified evidence that she can do it. It might be psionic, it might be chemical, we don't know.'

'It does wear off, though,' said Don. 'Once I got ... I mean, once the victim gets far enough away from her, he's back to normal, and he remembers everything that happened. Really, you know it's happening while it's happening, if you see what I mean, but you're happy to go along with it. It's weird.'

'So more like hypnosis than a psionic mind control,' said Electron.

'I guess so, though without the whole "look into my eyes" bit. Not that you mind looking into her ... well, anyway, it's a pretty powerful effect. Trust me.'

'And what about a Soviet called Detonator?' asked Scorpio.

'We know even less about him. Immense destructive potential, though. We know he had a run in with Supernova of the Defence League a while back, and the results were ... messy. Now look here, Scorpio, it's time to give us something back. What exactly is going on?'

'Sorry, Major, I guess we need to come clean. It started a couple of hours ago ...'

*

Scorpio and Electron stood together in open ground to the east of the city.

'Are you sure about this?' Scorpio asked.

'No. But I don't see any other options,' said Electron. 'Just go, I'll be fine. And I'll do my best not to get Nightflyer blown up.' He said it with a laugh in his voice, but to Scorpio it sounded like a nervous laugh. Shaking his head, Scorpio walked off. When he was well out of sight, Electron activated his communicator.

‘Computer? Has the status changed?’

‘Not since you last asked, seven point five minutes ago.’

‘Give me their current position.’

‘Female intruder, standing, leaning on the secondary power console. Male intruder, standing, 42 centimetres clockwise from the female. Nightflyer, seated in his customary seat at the conference table.’

Electron closed his eyes and tried to visualise the exact dimension of the control deck. ‘Ok. Are you ready to execute the plan?’

‘My readiness state is unchanged since you last asked.’

Electron raised his arms to chest height and spread his hands what he judged to be 42 centimetres apart. He wouldn’t be able to stop and look, he would have to be right first time.

‘They’re still there?’

‘Confirmed.’

‘Ok. Beam me up ... now.’

It worked like clockwork. The lights in the teleport booth began to glow, but even if Nightwing or Detonator noticed the glow, they could not react in the microsecond it took the teleport to complete. The instant he appeared on the platform, Electron’s own power teleported him the four point five metres to where he knew his targets were standing. If he was wrong, if he had overshot and his hands had materialised inside their bodies ...

But he wasn’t wrong. His hands dropped the last few centimetres to touch each of them, and he teleported with them back into the teleport booth, changing their orientation so that he had only to take one small step backwards off the platform. Nightwing was beginning to react, turning to look at him, but it was Detonator Electron was really worried about ...

The Computer activated the teleport and the Soviets vanished.

Electron’s knees sagged, a combination of physical stress from the rapid teleports and the tension of situation, and he found himself sitting on the floor.

‘Well,’ said Nightflyer. ‘She was ... interesting.’

Electron started laughing hysterically.

*

Nightwing and Detonator found themselves outdoors in darkness, somewhere to the east of Los Angeles. They were alone. Nightwing spent several seconds cursing colourfully in Russian. Detonator, implacable, waited until she had finished then gestured at a device that lay on the ground a couple of metres away. Nightwing bent to examine it. It was a simple cassette player. She pressed the ‘play’ button.

‘This is Scorpio. If you are hearing this, you know we have out-manoeuvred you. We are also changing our teleport security protocols so your stunt won’t work again. Please don’t try. You have seen our capabilities and our technology. You don’t want us as enemies.

‘We do understand why you acted as you did, though. And you have my word that we will find the Great Bear, if we can. As you surmised about us, we may operate in America but we do not consider ourselves American. As I’m sure you have now learned from Nightflyer, we are not from your Earth, and so we are not prejudiced by your political history. We are simply here to help people. Next time, please just ask.’

The recording ended. Detonator raised a quizzical eyebrow, and with a minor application of his power caused the device’s batteries to explosively release their energy, melting it to slag.

‘I don’t trust them,’ he said to Nightwing in Russian.

‘Strangely, comrade, I do.’

Epilogue

The *Royal Yacht* of High Ilona dropped out of warp drive in the vicinity of Uranus. On the bridge, anxious eyes scanned consoles.

‘Sensor report, navigator C’Kov?’ asked Captain M’Vell.

‘Sensor sweep negative, Captain.’ The navigator swivelled his chair to give his captain a cheeky grin. ‘We have beaten the Boluscans here.’

‘That’s because the *Royal Yacht* is the fastest ship in the galaxy,’ said helmsman S’Lu, pride in his voice.

Ignoring his crew’s banter, the captain turned to the Princess M’Krell, who sat behind and slightly above him as befitted her status.

‘You have a few more time-periods as a single woman, Highness,’ he said.

‘Don’t even joke about it, cousin,’ she chided him in a low voice. No matter how she felt about her impending nuptials, some things shouldn’t be discussed in front of the crew.

‘Captain!’ said C’Kov in sudden alarm. ‘Vessel emerging from behind that moon. It’s ... it’s a Krai battlecruiser, Captain!’

‘Raise shields! Evasive manoeuvres, helmsman. Outrun them if you can.’

‘She’s charging weapons ... disruptor bolts launched!’

S’Lu’s long, slender fingers danced across his helm console, but even a ship with the speed of the *Royal Yacht* can’t outrun pure energy. The battlecruiser’s disruptors struck their shields and the bridge bucked, throwing several crew members clear of their seats.

‘Damage reports coming in from all decks,’ someone was shouting.

‘Return fire, C’Kov,’ said M’Vell. But he knew it was futile. The Krai battlecruiser far outgunned the relatively tiny *Royal Yacht*. He swung around to the Princess. ‘Highness, you must evacuate.’

‘What? Ridic—’

‘Highness, we cannot win this fight.’ A console exploded in a shower of sparks to underline his words. ‘And we can’t warp out while we’re taking fire. But we can buy you time to escape. The third planet of this system is inhabited. You can shelter there until rescue arrives.’

‘I won’t leave you to die for me,’ she said firmly. On the outside she might have the small and delicate frame of a young High Ilonan woman, but inside she had the steel resolve of a princess of the royal blood. M’Vell had no doubts she would die nobly. But that wasn’t her decision to make. She had a higher duty.

‘Highness ... M’Krell ... dying for you is our job. Please ... make our deaths meaningful.’

*

Aboard the Krai battlecruiser *Kabal*, a surprised crewman yelped a report. ‘The Ilonan is turning towards us!’

‘Torpedo spread launched,’ reported another.

Captain Korrett bared her teeth in a lupine grin. A fight was more glorious than a slaughter.

‘Point defence, deal with the torpedoes. Helm, maintain course. Tractor beams, ready on my order.’

The main screen showed numerous explosions as her mighty cruiser’s disruptors dealt with the Ilonan’s pitiful torpedo spread. For a moment, the energy release overloaded their sensors. When the screen cleared, the Ilonan was suddenly a lot closer than expected. Were the fools trying to ram?

‘Main battery, open fire!’

Energy stabbed out, and a second later the Ilonan ship exploded into a fireball. Korrett sat back and slitted her eyes in satisfaction. Now to plant the evidence that the accursed Boluscans were behind the ambush, and thus drive a wedge between their empires forever. A wedge that would allow the Krai to

conquer them one empire at a time. This was a great day for the Krai, and for Korrett's personal standing within the captain's caste.

'Captain,' said a junior sensor technician tremulously. 'I think I detected a launch away from their ship when the main sensors were blinded.'

Korrett sprang to her feet and crossed the bridge to look over the tech's shoulder. The tech, conditioned from birth to fear superiors, cringed away from her. But Korrett saw the small energy signature the tech had noticed.

'Too small for a shuttle, too light for a torpedo ... ah, a personal survival suit? You have done well, technician. Navigation, extrapolate that object's course.'

'This system's third planet, Captain. Data banks indicate it is inhabited.'

'I am aware of the planet's status, whelp!'

Korrett considered her options. The planet was a red flag in the annals of Krai history, and to approach it without authorisation was a capital offence. Korrett was not of high enough status to know why, as it was apparently primitive, barely capable of intra-system space travel.

To allow the survivor to escape would mean a failure of Korrett's mission, however. And Korrett had the power of the *Kabal* behind her, a power greater than anything the third planet's primitive civilization possessed.

'Helm, set a course for the third planet. Stealth mode.'

Korrett sat back in her chair and allowed fantasies of glory to pass in front of her eyes.

*

The small Boluscan cruiser dropped out of hyperspace. The humanoid woman at the controls glanced over her console.

'No sign of the Ilonans, Singularity. Looks like we ... wait a minute, I'm registering debris and residual energy fields!'

Singularity, sitting in the captain's chair, looked round the bridge at his hand-picked team: Satellite, Starquake, Corona, Starburst, and himself. All members of the elite Star Guard, the super-powered protectors of the Emissariate of Bolusca.

'Full sensor sweep, Satellite' he said.

'Already doing it,' the pilot replied. 'Recent warp activity, two ships, High Ilonan and ... a Krai.'

There was a gasp from Starquake, the rookie member of their team. Ignoring him, Satellite continued to report her instrument readings.

'Debris is consistent with a small Ilonan cruiser. There's a Krai energy trail ... leading to the third planet.'

Singularity thought it over. The third planet was interdicted territory for the Krai. That was why the Boluscans and Ilonans had chosen this system for their rendezvous. What could drive the Krai captain to break the interdiction? There could be only one answer.

'Steer for the third planet. Stealth mode, passive sensors only.'

'Singularity, you know that planet is off limits to us too,' said Corona, her solar aura flashing dangerously.

'I am aware. But the Krai's only reason to go there is if they are tracking survivors. And if there are survivors, that's where we're going too. You've been a Star Guard as long as I have, Corona. I don't need to remind you of the oath.'

Suppressing a retort, Corona turned away from him.

'All right, Star Guard, let's go and see what this third planet is hiding.'

Next: Crossfire